

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Summertime. . . long, lazy, sun-bright days; family picnics, poolside banter, concerts in the park, trips to the zoo; quiet nights, interrupted only by crickets and an occasional tree frog. Sound too good to be true? It probably is. Summer just isn't what it used to be.

Parents anticipating the end of another school year often do so with apprehension and some questions: What are our children going to do all summer long? If old enough, do they have jobs? If the children live in single-parent homes or homes with two working parents, how well will the children be supervised? What about the children's friends and their summer plans - will their activities have an impact on our kids? How can parents ensure that their children will stay out of trouble?

It isn't easy being a parent today. With so many parents working outside the home, a large percentage of our children are unsupervised during the long summer months. Free time and lack of supervision are the two ingredients which, when combined, can result in a recipe for disaster.

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The use of alcohol and other drugs by children is always of great concern to parents, but summer vacation brings added worry. Tobacco is often the first drug that children will use. In addition to the very serious health problems that result from tobacco smoking and chewing, use of this highly addictive drug also frequently serves as a steppingstone to other drug use. Once children disobey parents and break laws regarding the purchase and use of tobacco products, it is relatively simple for them to ignore prohibitions against the use of alcohol and marijuana. Once they learn how to smoke tobacco, it is much easier to smoke marijuana and crack. And once the rules about tobacco are broken, the next step is often alcohol.

Studies have found that the average first use of alcohol occurs at 12 1/2 years of age. Generally, that drink is first taken at an unsupervised home, often during the summer. With these statistics in mind, parents clearly need to take steps for a summer that will be alcohol and drug free.

Establishing a safe summertime environment depends on the availability of family and community resources; yet, certain principles are universal:

- o At the beginning of the summer, parents and children must come

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to an agreement which places importance on giving structure to each day. Children who have no set plans for their waking hours are at risk for using alcohol and other drugs. By developing a summertime plan of action, the chances for trouble are minimized.

o Summer should certainly be a time for fun, but by incorporating work into the routine, children will learn to develop a sense of responsibility which will stay with them throughout their lives. If they are too young to be employed outside the home, or are unable to find summer employment, there are still opportunities for work, either at home or in the neighborhood. Pet and plant care for vacationing neighbors, lawn mowing and yard work, housecleaning for working parents, babysitting, errand-running - there are many chores children can undertake which will cut down on the amount of free time available to them, thereby eliminating the chance that boredom and mischief will lead to alcohol or other drug use.

o It is critical that teenagers are occupied and supervised, with jobs, sports and other pursuits during the summer months. Volunteering their time for the benefit of others is another

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good way to burn up some of that adolescent energy. Also , activities that help protect the environment, such as recycling or road, park and stream cleanup provide visible results while establishing good lifetime habits. It is essential that they are kept busy!

- o Parents should communicate with other parents to plan for a summer that is safe for all children. It is particularly important to avoid placing youngsters in unsupervised situations. Day camps, community or county recreational programs, swimming pool memberships, planned outings (hikes, amusement parks, museums, scheduled sports activities, etc.) are more easily attainable when parents share in the planning, transportation and supervision.

Providing an action-packed summer, however, does not guarantee perfectly behaved children. Things can and will go wrong. The increasing independence and mobility of teens (many have access to automobiles or public transportation), often puts them in situations where alcohol and drugs are readily available. Parents must prepare their kids to say "no" when these situations occur. If necessary, they can help them make up excuses and volunteer to act as scapegoats so the adolescents can refuse drugs

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acceptably. Parents who are tuned in to their children, who insist that open communication play a vital role in their relationship, are much better able to help their kids refuse drugs. Knowing what their children are thinking, where they're going, and who they'll be with are all important factors in preventing alcohol and drug use. When communication is good, the kids are less likely to get into trouble.

Because they want to believe their children will never become involved with alcohol or other drugs, parents often fail to see the signs of use. They need to remember that they, the parents, are in charge, not the children. It's necessary to ask the tough questions when alcohol or drug use is suspected while keeping in mind that both denial and manipulation are typical behaviors of the user.

Children and teens require privacy; it's part of growing up. Yet, parents who suspect their children of drug use should give themselves permission to check their rooms if they believe a search will provide them with needed information. The need for privacy must be weighed against the health and safety of the children. Their lives are at stake.

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Summer vacation should be fun, for children and parents. And it can be. By carefully planning supervised activities that keep children busy, everyone wins. Enjoy the summer!

For further information or guidance, please call the American Council for Drug Education at 1-800-488-DRUG.

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The American Council for Drug Education is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to preventing drug abuse through public education.